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ABSTRACT

An assignment about protesting was given to students in an upper-level undergraduate women's studies course to provide them with experience and skills in political protesting and to promote feminist activism. The students selected for their assignments: (1) a letter writing campaign against Robert Bork's Supreme Court nomination; (2) a picket protesting a court decision about child custody rights; (3) marching in the 1987 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington, D.C.; (4) a complaint to television networks about sexism; (5) a complaint to local police about the handling of a local incident; (6) a challenge to a Christian college about the pressure to date and marry; and (7) a protest against a campus contest. The assignment's outcomes included the ability to identify specific issues and targets, to learn political strategy, and to effect student feelings of efficacy. Some cautions to instructors adopting this learning experience included: (1) the assignments must be nonthreatening to the student; (2) decisions for students should be avoided, but suggestions should be provided; and (3) instructors should be able to judge a student's emotional stability. Two references were provided. (DJC)

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The Protest as a Teaching Technique for Promoting Feminist Activism*

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The Protest as a Teaching Technique for Promoting Feminist Activism

Women's Studies courses have been hugely successful at facilitating the personal growth of students, including changing attitudes about gender roles, enhancing feelings of personal worth, increasing career goals, and developing an awareness of women's common oppression (e.g., Bennett & Grosser, 1981; Stake & Gerner, 1987). However, a major challenge that feminist faculty continue to face even in established Women's Studies programs is how to motivate students to strive for social, as well as personal, change. A raised consciousness does not automatically lead to rabble-rousing. Feminist faculty more than ever need to develop classroom techniques that specifically promote activism, particularly because Women's Studies now provides a safe haven for feminists on many campuses, making it less necessary for students (and faculty!) to agitate for social change in the university and community. In addition, even students dedicated to feminist goals may lack the experience and skills required to translate their commitment into action. The future of feminism will be affected, in part, by our ability to help students become activists and leaders.

How might advocacy and action be encouraged in the Women's Studies classroom? I decided to make a "protest" part of the requirement for an upper-level course I was teaching, Theories of Feminism, at the suggestion of a colleague from Washington University, Joyce Trebilcot. I chose an upper-level course for this experiment, because many students in lower-level courses are being exposed to feminist thought for the first time and have not undergone the personal growth that precedes action. Seven of the eight students enrolled were Women's Studies certificate earners and all had taken at least one W.S. course previously. A range of characteristics was represented in the group: five students (2 black, 3 white) were heterosexual

women in their 20s; three were white lesbians (one in her 20s and two in their 40s). All labeled themselves as a feminist.

The assignment was to: "Protest sexism, racism, homophobia, or any other -ism related to feminist thought in one situation." The protest could be done by writing a letter of complaint or "to the editor," by confronting the institution or person directly, by organizing a picket or leafleting or letter-writing campaign, or by any other creative means. Students were to discuss their ideas for a protest with the class and to write a two page paper describing the action and their feelings about it. Fulfillment of the protest requirement was worth 10% of the student's grade. Full credit was given for completion of the assignment in any form. "Quality" of the protest was not assessed in order to keep the assignment as nonthreatening as possible and to encourage nonhierarchical student-teacher relations.

Overall, the protest assignment was highly successful. Upon entering the class, six students had never been involved in any social action. They had never written a letter of complaint or verbally protested sexism, racism, or homophobia, and none had ever been involved in a collective protest action. By the end of the semester, five of the novice activists had taken a stand on a issue they cared about deeply (or at least, moderately), as had the two experienced lesbian activists.

The protests ranged from those in the time-honored traditions of marching and petitioning to letter-writing. One novice protester, a young black woman, got heavily involved in the campaign to stop Robert Bork, a right-wing ideologue, from being appointed to the Supreme Court. She learned of Bork's racism and sexism in class discussions and began her protest by asking all her friends and neighbors to sign and mail anti-Bork postcards to their legislators. Enraged by the continued support of Bork by the conservative Republican senators from Missouri, she drew her mother into her protest and

wrote additional letters of complaint to the Senators. This student also helped NARAL in a petition-signing drive to defeat Bork. Over the course of the semester, she became more knowledgeable about the importance of Supreme Court appointments, more identified with the anti-Bork campaign, and more comfortable being in the midst of a battle. Most importantly, she expressed a sense of personal victory with the defeat of the Bork nomination, writing in her paper, "Many people say it is impossible to beat the system and most of the time it is. But every now and then you can win. I'm lucky. I've won my first fight, and I hope to win many more."

Other protests included organizing picketing to protest a court decision that denied custody to a lesbian mother, participating in the 1987 Gay and Lesbian March on Washington aimed at repealing sodomy laws, complaining to networks about sexist television programming, protesting the handling by local police of an attack on one student's car by gang youths, challenging the administrators at a Christian university one student had attended about the pressure to date and marry that was institutionalized in campus and chapel activities, and protesting a "sexy legs" contest held on campus. Two students also wrote letters of praise, one to Working Assets, an investment company, for promoting socially responsible investing, and one to a local news station, which had broadcast an excellent week long segment on battered women.

A few students made the decision to get more involved when their initial protests were ineffective or received an unsatisfactory response. For instance, the young white woman angered about the sexy legs contest decided to investigate the decision-making process and funding for these events. When she learned it was not a campus-sponsored activity, she nonetheless pressured student and faculty representatives to the university senate to challenge Student Affairs for not censuring the event. She also wrote an article for

the Women's Studies newsletter about the contest and resolved to get involved next year in the student affairs committee that reviews such events. Likewise, the white student who protested police unwillingness to file a report on the gang violence and complained about racist comments the police made about the youths refused to withdraw her complaint against the officer despite pressure and a visit from police to her home. She eventually was sent a letter of apology from the Captain indicating that new procedures for dealing with similar incidents were now in effect.

Only one student had considerable difficulty with the assignment and did not complete it as originally defined. She cared about feminist issues but could not think of a target for protest. The group shared their experiences and tried to help her pinpoint an issue, but she floundered until the very end of the semester. The idea of complaining made her anxious; she often missed class. Finally, I proposed that she initiate a positive action, if she could not develop a protest, and urged her to speak out in praise of an event or institution she viewed as particularly egalitarian or nonsexist. Even this was hard for her to do, but she at last wrote a very substantive letter of praise to a local news station for their series on battered women.

The merits of using the protest as an assignment in Women's Studies classes, based on this one trial, are threefold. First, it helped students translate vague dissatisfactions about "the way things are" into specific issues and targets. One effect Women's Studies courses have is to make students aware of how monolithic sexism is; however, this desired outcome also often depresses motivation for action. By encouraging students to identify a concrete target of sexism and to act against it, the chinks in the monolith become visible.

Second, planning a protest even if it is only letter writing teaches students political strategy. Students considered and discussed who was

responsible for the specific oppression, where the best outlet was for their message, and what issue and strategy was the best use of their energy. Should the protest be aimed at the television station manager or the advertisers or both? Should complaints be addressed to the police captain or the mayor? Was there enough community support for leafleting or picketing? Many ideas were discarded after discussion or started and then abandoned. For example, the second black woman considered protesting a local automotive supply store her boyfriend shopped at because they had pictures of nude women all over the store. After talking about this idea, she decided to reject it because not enough women went to the store to appeal to them as consumers and because she thought any public protest might give the store free publicity and improve its business. Another student, a white woman on an athletic scholarship, began investigating why women's sports were so poorly funded by the university compared to men's. She was unable to get access to budget information and was stonewalled by the coaches and athletic director, so she eventually gave up on the idea. These "failures" were learning experiences in themselves, helping the women evaluate intial ideas, carefully strategize, and be prepared to cope with frustration.

The third advantage of the protest assignment was its effect on students' feelings of efficacy. Even when a student did not achieve the outcome she desired or did not receive any response to her actions, the act of protesting was empowering. The peer group norm that was created supported each woman's right to be annoyed, disgusted, or outraged at our oppression and to do something about it. The peer support was crucial, particularly for students with friends, family, or boyfriends who ridiculed or discouraged their anger.

Two problems associated with the protest assignment did arise, however, that require faculty preparation. First, even after teaching Women's Studies

courses for more than ten years, I was surprised by the anxiety and uncertainty the assignment generated among students. I was well aware of how difficult it was to get students (or anyone) involved in social action, but still could not comprehend what obstacles prevented some students from focusing on an issue, given the availability of countless worthy causes. I was frustrated by the unspoken desire of several for me to tell them what to do. If using this technique, be prepared to give suggestions, but also to avoid making decisions for students.

The second problem concerned the need for me, the teacher, to gauge whether a student was truly capable emotionally of handling the consequences of her protest. Inexperienced students frequently are unaware of the depths of misogyny in our society and are personally devastated by an antifeminist backlash. For example, the student who protested the sexy legs contest was crushed when a hostile male student's response to her was published. She also was quite distraught about a negative personal ad someone placed in the paper about her. She wanted to respond by picketing the event. Her extreme distress about the backlash alarmed me, however, and I discouraged her from picketing when she could not arouse sufficient support for the action from other students. In my judgment, she was not able by herself to handle the hostility picketing would generate. In class, other strategies were suggested, which she later pursued. Thus, it is crucial that the teacher encourage students to anticipate all possible personal consequences of a protest and to evaluate their ability to accept those consequences. If necessary, the teacher should discourage a student from a protest that might be too costly for her.

In conclusion, the protest was a highly effective teaching technique for promoting feminist activism, particularly in an upper-level Women's Studies class. It probably also could be adapted for lower level courses, if made an

option for earning course credit. The protest taught students how to speak out when their rights or values were violated. Making the protest a course requirement legitimized political action as a form of "scholarship" and provided opportunities for putting theory into action. It also had the added advantage of rewarding students already active in the movement by valuing and giving credit for their ongoing activities. If "passivity is the dragon each woman must slay in her quest for independence," as Jill Johnston claimed, then the protest is truly the teaching technique that can make that happen.

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